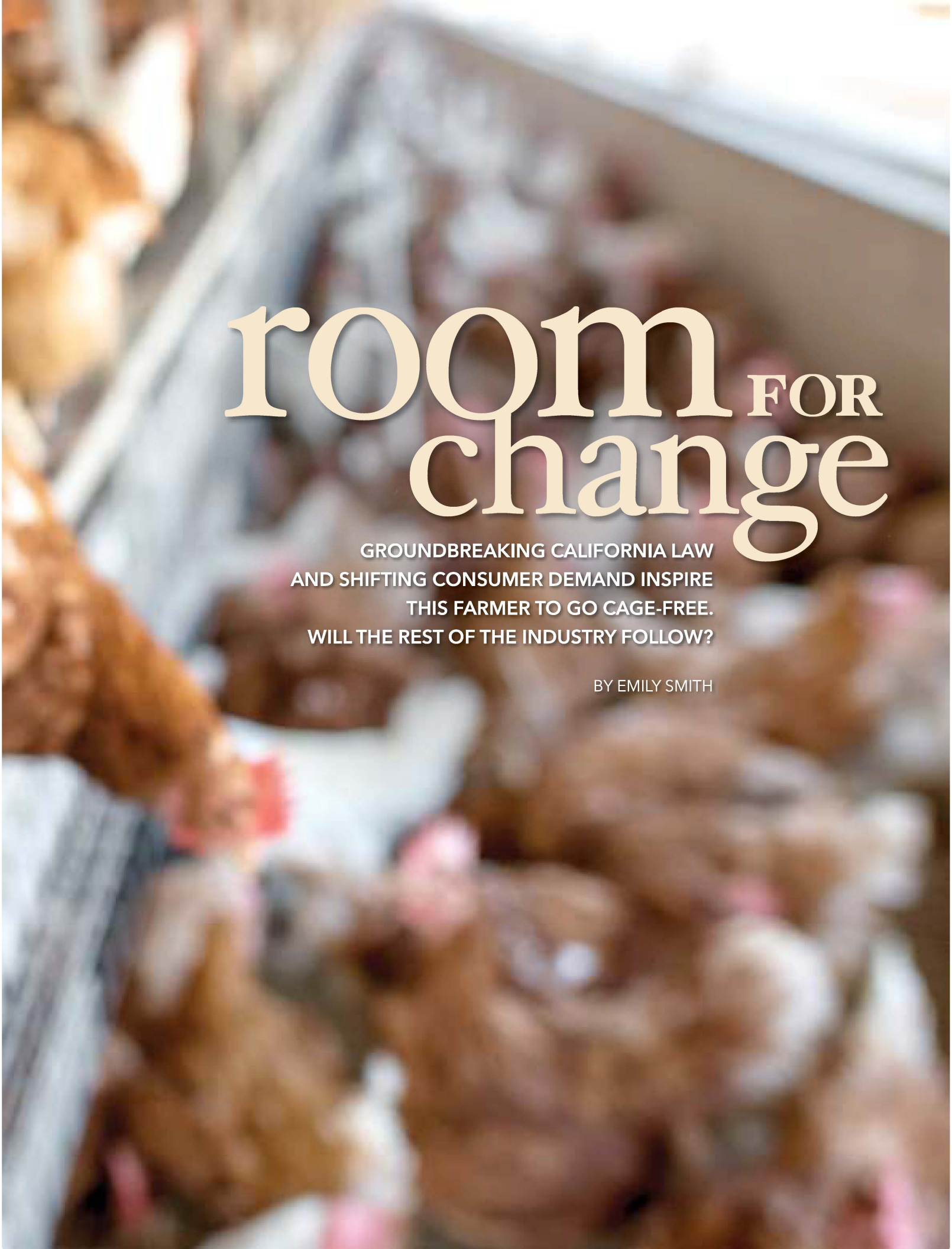

room for change

GROUNDBREAKING CALIFORNIA LAW AND SHIFTING CONSUMER DEMAND INSPIRE THIS FARMER TO GO CAGE-FREE. WILL THE REST OF THE INDUSTRY FOLLOW?

BY EMILY SMITH

Frank Hilliker in his first cage-free hen house.

SOMETIMES FRANK HILLIKER gets out of bed at 3 a.m. just to watch his hens wake up. Coffee in hand, he walks down to House 5 in the darkened quiet and waits. The soft automated lights switch on, feathered heads pop up here and there, and a chorus begins to build of clucks and click-click-clicks of clawed feet moving about on metal perches.

It's breakfast time.

At exactly 4:05 a.m., the churning of the feed auger sends the hens into a frenzy of activity as the morning's first meal rolls out.

Hilliker, a third-generation egg farmer, studies his hens' morning routine, shaking his head at their antics. His family has been caring for chickens since 1942, but never like this. For 70 years, Hilliker's Ranch Fresh Eggs just outside San Diego raised chickens in cages. A California law called Proposition 2 is changing that.

"Chickens in cages, they don't act like [this], you know," Hilliker says. "They wake up, eat, drink, eat, drink, poop, lay an egg." That's it.

With huge support from a coalition of animal protection groups, led by The HSUS, Prop 2 overwhelmingly passed in 2008, making California the fifth state to ban gestation crates for pigs, the third to ban veal crates and the first to eliminate battery cages—small cages that give egg-laying hens little room to move. The law, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2015, requires egg producers to give their chickens enough space to spread their wings, stand up and turn around.

Hilliker and his sister, Lara Woliung, are transitioning all five henhouses on their ranch to cage-free. House 5, their first aviary, opened in 2014. They plan to open House 4 in August.

With the new setup, Hilliker has learned a lot about his hens' natural behavior. It's completely different than the behavior of caged hens, he says, and in the beginning, it was baffling. They socialize and form cliques, they investigate people who come into the house with a nosy peck on the foot, and they stick to routines—anticipating each mealtime and often roosting in the same spot high in the rafters night after night.

"It's been a whole new way of farming; it's been pretty invigorating," says Hilliker, who is considering taking his flock free-range in the next five years. "For me, because it was such a new challenge in learning how to do all this, it's made farming fun again."

That's the power of Prop 2, the largest agricultural statement made by The HSUS to date, says Paul Shapiro, vice president of the HSUS Farm Animal Protection Campaign.

More than seven years ago, fresh off successful initiatives in Florida, Arizona and other states, Shapiro's team and other groups set their sights on improving the

lives of farm animals in California. Getting the measure passed in the country's top state for agriculture was no easy feat: About 4,000 volunteers gathered more than half a million signatures to get it on the ballot; an army of advocates then helped educate voters through powerful advertising campaigns, including flyers they passed out at farmers markets and more.

"This was the first time chickens were up at bat, and it wasn't in a small egg production state; it was in a giant egg production state with 19 million hens," Shapiro says.

At the time, Shapiro predicted a successful vote would set in motion nationwide reform. It did.

California's legislators went on to require that all shell eggs sold in the state, regardless of where they were produced, meet the Prop 2 standards—an important national signal, given the size of California's market. Michigan banned battery cages, Ohio placed a moratorium on their use in any new facilities and Oregon and Washington passed laws to phase out the most common caging system for laying hens. There's been corporate progress as well, with food service companies such as Burger King, Starbucks, Unilever, Aramark, Compass Group and Sodexo all going cage-free in their supply chains.

"It's hard to envision much of this happening in a pre-Prop 2 world," Shapiro says.

Media coverage and ad campaigns from animal protection groups such as The HSUS opened consumers' eyes to the horrific conditions at factory farms, with an accompanying effect on dietary choices: A 2010 study by the University of Kansas found people were buying fewer meat products because of all of the attention swirling around Prop 2.

That rise in consciousness paved the way for producers with higher welfare standards, such as the Happy Egg Co., a British free-range company that came to the United States in 2012 solely because of the California measure.

"Prop 2 has, is and will positively change egg farming," says Happy Egg chief operating officer David Wagstaff. Its provisions will eventually become "the new normal," he says. After all, that's exactly what happened in Happy Egg's home country. Europe banned battery cages in 1999 and gave egg producers 12 years to phase them out. During that time, consumer demand shifted steadily toward more humanely raised products. Happy Egg executives believed the U.S. market would respond to Prop 2 the same way, and it looks as if they might be right.

> "It's been a whole new way of farming; it's been pretty invigorating. For me ... it's made farming fun again."
>
> – FRANK HILLIKER, THIRD-GENERATION FARMER AT HILLIKER'S RANCH FRESH EGGS

This year the company will expand from eight farms in the United States to 15 and expects sales to reach $23 million, compared to $17 million in 2014.

There's clearly a strong market for higher welfare standards in this country, Wagstaff says.

It's a better environment for the hen, he says, "and it's certainly a happier environment for [the farmer] than going into a barn and seeing chickens with no feathers on them. … You can surely be passionate about something with high animal welfare rather than something that weighs on your conscience all of the time, which can be quite uncomfortable."

THE SUN is just beginning to rise in Lakeside, California, painting the darkened sky above the mountains a delicate robin's egg blue. Already the chickens' songs float on the air.

Hilliker pulls up in his white Ford pickup truck. His ranch manager, Mike Nyland, opens the gate, and without much more than a good morning, the two get to work. Standing outside House 5 in camouflage-print shorts, work boots and the ranch's logoed shirt, his sunglasses perched on top of a dusty, worn logoed hat, Hilliker listens to the clucks and coos of approximately 7,500 brown and white leghorns. "I'd say they sing more in here," Hilliker says.

The birds leap from perch to floor, floor to perch, wings spread wide in a fleeting attempt at flight. Some strut down the center aisle, scratching at the ground in search of a snack. Others hang out in the outer aisles of the open-sided building, resting in the growing morning light, their feathers stirred by an early breeze.

The aviary—a two-rowed system of nesting boxes, perches, feed trays and water lines—has changed nearly everything about

Millions of hens at Rose Acre Farms spend their entire lives in tiny cages, stacked on top of one another, unable to even spread their wings. The Indiana-based company recently announced it will go cage-free.

PREVIOUS SPREAD AND OPPOSITE PAGE: DAVID PAUL MORRIS/FOR THE HSUS; THIS PAGE: THE HSUS

the way Hilliker cares for his chickens. The company that designed the system taught him how to manage it and create a schedule for the flock: when to feed them, when to gather eggs, when to turn the lights down to encourage sleep and when to bring them up to start the day. It was like starting from scratch, he says, but he was eager to learn.

"I gotta learn how the system works; I gotta learn the bird behavior," says Hilliker, who persuaded the company to donate a section of chicken housing to the local high school's agriculture program so students could learn, too. "In the beginning, I was here when they were waking up and going to bed. Every day, seven days a week. You gotta learn; I don't want to be a bad farmer."

Instead of food being delivered by hand twice a day to cage troughs, augers churn feed onto two levels of the aviary six times a day. Instead of manure piling up underneath cages, a conveyor belt on each aviary row carries waste to the end of the 184-foot building, where it's cleared away for folks to buy as fertilizer.

While chickens naturally want to lay their eggs in a dark, quiet spot, birds in tiny cages have no choice. The hens in House 5 have two rows of nesting boxes, each with its own privacy door, though they needed a little help learning how to use it.

Ropes of bright orange LED lights line the areas above and below the boxes to discourage laying. When the hens moved in, Hilliker and Nyland walked through 16 times a day to gather hundreds of misplaced eggs and tuck them into the boxes, showing the birds where they should lay.

It took a few weeks, but now the hens have the hang of it. Nyland still walks through four times a day, looking for wayward eggs—now finding only a few dozen—and for any signs of trouble with the hens or with the system.

On one walkthrough, he spots a bird who seems to have dust irritating her eye. He gently tucks her under his arm and finishes his round before taking her to the sick pen, where she'll get medical attention and return to the flock when she's well. On most factory farms, where producers manage millions of hens, she likely would have gone unnoticed and untreated.

"You gotta take care of the animals,"

THIS SPREAD, ALL ABOVE: DAVID PAUL MORRIS/FOR THE HSUS; TIMELINE, FROM LEFT: EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY; ERIC JOHNSON; EGGS: SIRENGE/FOTOLIA; FARM SANCTUARY; DAVID PAUL MORRIS/FOR THE HSUS; THE HSUS; NAYPONG/FOTOLIA

Prop 2 and Its Ripple Effects

Several key victories for farm animals helped set the stage for Prop 2. After it passed, other bans on extreme confinement and changes in the egg industry spread nationwide.

2007 and earlier

In 2002, Florida outlaws gestation crates for breeding pigs, and Arizona bans gestation and veal calf crates in 2006. In 2007, Burger King begins phasing in cage-free eggs, chef Wolfgang Puck drops battery eggs from his supply chain and Oregon bans gestation crates.

2008

Prop 2 passes in California, and Colorado bans both gestation and veal crates.

2009

Michigan bans gestation crates, veal crates and battery cages. Maine prohibits gestation and veal crates.

2010

California announces it will outlaw the sale of whole eggs from caged hens, regardless of where they were produced.

From left: Ranch manager Mike Nyland sorts eggs as they come off the conveyor belt in the cage-free house; Julian Dowling uses a suction system to move eggs onto a belt for washing; Lisa Hilliker looks for imperfections; after eggs have been graded and handpacked into cartons, Frank Hilliker boxes them for delivery.

Nyland says.

There's at least one catch to working in the new cage-free environment, he jokes as he points to the spots on the back of his pale blue Hilliker logoed shirt: "They can poop on you."

HILLIKER AND HIS SISTER grew up hand-collecting eggs, just as their parents and grandparents did. But the aviary changed that, too.

When a hen lays her egg in the nesting box, it rolls down a slight slope onto a conveyor belt protected inside the aviary. With a flip of a switch, the belt moves all the eggs out to a table where someone sorts them.

The technology took some adjusting. The first time Hilliker's mother, Lisa, turned on the conveyor, "it was like Lucy in the candy factory," she says, her arms waving frantically. "Here come white eggs and brown eggs, you know, all together, and we had to separate them."

It turns out there's a knob to slow that belt down, she says, with a sheepish shrug.

On this day Nyland is at the controls, deftly sorting a steady stream of eggs. White eggs on one tray, brown eggs on another, cracked or flawed eggs in a bucket, small eggs on this tray and super jumbos—"a secret item" at the ranch store, Nyland says—on that one.

When the conveyor is empty, Nyland moves the rolling rack of eggs up to the packaging room. There they'll be scrubbed, checked for cracks and imperfections, graded by weight, packaged, labeled and sent out to grocery stores, restaurants and other businesses. Some get set aside for the weekend's farmers markets and others are stocked in the refrigerated cases inside the packaging room, which doubles as the store.

People stop in all day for eggs; some have been customers for decades. Others, like Kara Richter, come because of the cage-free house.

Richter lives nearby. She supports local

2011

Unilever becomes the first major food manufacturer to commit to using only cage-free eggs in its products, and Ohio prohibits the construction of new battery-cage facilities.

2012

Burger King, Dunkin' Brands and Harris Teeter Supermarkets switch to cage-free eggs. Rhode Island bans gestation and veal crates.

2013

Marriott International and Au Bon Pain announce plans to switch to cage-free eggs.

2014

Starbucks, Nestle, Centerplate and Delaware North Companies make cage-free announcements, while Unilever becomes the first company to work with the global egg industry to end its killing of male chicks. Kentucky bans gestation crates.

2015

Sodexo, Aramark and Compass Group, three of the world's largest food service providers, announce they will all transition to cage-free eggs.

Comparison of Four Systems for Laying Hens

BATTERY CAGE: On average, each caged laying hen has only 67 square inches of cage space—less space than this page on which to live her entire life. These hens are unable to even spread their wings.

ENRICHED CAGE: These cages typically include a nest box, perch and a litter area for dustbathing. They are larger than battery cages, but still only give each hen 116 square inches of room.

CAGE-FREE: These birds have room to walk and spread their wings and can hop up to perch and lay their eggs in nests. California farmer Frank Hilliker estimates that each of his cage-free hens has about 3 square feet, or 432 square inches.

FREE-RANGE: Birds are uncaged and have outdoor access, although the USDA doesn't regulate quality or quantity. Hens at the Happy Egg Co. live mostly outdoors, and each has about 14 square feet of room, or 2,016 square inches.

+ FOR MORE INFORMATION on how to read egg carton labels, go to *humanesociety.org/egglabels*.

businesses, "and I do like that they're treating their chickens better," she says as she loads a flat of 30 eggs into her car. "I think that it's nice."

Prop 2 was tough to swallow, Hilliker acknowledges. "We've been producing eggs since 1942 the way our grandparents taught us, the way our father taught us."

After the measure passed nearly 2 to 1 in 2008, Hilliker says he and his family spent a lot of time wringing their hands.

His father had been stepping back gradually from managing the ranch, letting Hilliker and Woliung get a feel for the business. But when he died unexpectedly in 2009, figuring out how to comply with Prop 2 was up to them.

Lisa Hilliker is quite proud of the changes her children have made to the ranch. "It's amazing, just amazing," she says. "I'm sure my late husband's parents would just be agog at the whole thing."

It hasn't been easy. Reducing the number of hens to give them more space dropped the ranch's production almost in half—from 22,000 eggs a day to about 12,000—and when all five houses are renovated Hilliker estimates he will have spent $1 million. House 5 alone cost $220,000 to open. Similar changes across the state led to a modest increase in egg prices this year, according to the California Grocers Association. Hilliker is charging a few pennies more per egg, and if he adds outdoor access for his hens, he'll raise his prices again.

But eggs are still one of the cheapest animal products in the marketplace, and many customers like Veronique Cometti, who stopped by the Hillikers' booth at the Scripps Ranch Farmers Market in San Diego, say they don't mind paying a little extra for better animal treatment and food safety. "I think it's fairest to have the chickens that are allowed to be free, not only for me eating the eggs but also for the hens," she says.

Cometti visits her father's native Switzerland and says Europeans seem to be more conscious of their food choices than Americans are. "It's changing [here]," she says. "It's slow, but it's changing."

Hilliker's storyline—from cages, to cage-free, to an eye on free-range—mirrors the transition seen in Europe. Wagstaff, who notes that 60 percent of eggs sold in Britain are cage-free, says there's definitely room in the U.S. marketplace for more farms like Happy Egg's, especially as U.S. consumer demand shifts as it has overseas, though perhaps fueled by a different motive.

"Consumers in the U.K. and Europe are very animal welfare-friendly and they drive change, where in the U.S consumers seem to be more zoned in on whether the product is better for them," Wagstaff says. "It's almost a bit more of a selfish approach,

EXTREME CONFINEMENT: Most eggs sold in the United States come from hens who live their whole lives crowded into cramped cages like this one.

really. … It's actually going to take awhile for consumers to become more educated."

But we're getting there. Since Prop 2 went into effect Jan. 1, Happy Egg's sales in the U.S. have increased by about 25 percent while more retailers switch from battery eggs to cage-free, an impressive stat the company attributes to its market share in California and increased interest in animal welfare across the country. The sales bump is a big reason for Happy Egg's expansion in the Ozark Woodlands of Arkansas and Missouri. Each of the company's 15 farms raises about 16,000 birds on pasture, with each hen having about 14 square feet. Because of the mild climate, "the girls," as the company calls them, are outside year-round, with access to a barn too, of course.

The change is playing out across the market. Today, about 90 percent of the country's 305 million laying hens live in cages—down from 98 percent before Prop 2. Perhaps no company better illustrates this turnaround than Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms, one of the country's largest producers. In 2010, an HSUS investigation found widespread suffering among the 5 million hens confined at three Rose Acre facilities. Crammed in cages stacked as many as eight high, birds trapped in wire couldn't reach food and water and were trampled by other hens. Some fell into manure pits and were abandoned. Subsequent inspection by the Food and Drug Administration found salmonella contamination at one of the facilities.

But in a stunning announcement this year, the company said it will go entirely cage-free. "They see the writing on the wall," says Shapiro of The HSUS. "Cage

A battery cage hen spends her entire life in a space this small.

8.6″

7.8″

The hens at Happy Egg Co.'s farms in the Ozark Woodlands of Missouri and Arkansas spend most of the year on land the size of four football fields. They have structures for perching, nesting boxes for laying and barns for shelter. The British company expanded into the United States because of Prop 2.

confinement has no future." Right now Rose Acre keeps 350,000 of its roughly 25 million hens in cage-free housing and will increase that number as the company adds new houses and replaces old ones.

Consumers can continue to drive changes like these by asking retailers and restaurants such as McDonald's and Walmart why they're still selling eggs from caged hens, says Shapiro.

"If we demand higher standards, there will be a supply," says Mahi Klosterhalfen, CEO and president of the Albert Schweitzer Foundation, an animal protection organization in Germany.

Along with Wagstaff, Klosterhalfen believes that mandatory egg labeling would dramatically improve the welfare of America's hens. Before label regulations were introduced in Germany in 2004, 90 percent of all eggs sold in the country came from caged hens, he says. Within a couple of years, that number dropped to 50 percent, and by 2008, consumer demand and animal protection groups, including Klosterhalfen's, had persuaded nearly all German grocery stores to stop selling eggs from caged hens.

"Prop 2 [proves] that legal progress is also possible in the U.S.," he says, "and that the arguments of factory farmers against this progress are invalid."

SUNLIGHT IS FADING at the Hilliker ranch in California, and the boisterous clucks in House 5 have quieted into a murmur. The automated lights are slowly dimming, and the rafters are filling with hens, who claim a spot one-by-one.

Hilliker and Nyland, the ranch manager, are here to "tuck them in" for the night. Nyland wears a headlamp as he walks through the house one more time, looking for eggs and lifting a few stragglers onto a perch so they can sleep.

Near Hilliker's head, a brown leghorn leaps up to take her spot, falters slightly and hops back to the ground. He reaches down to boost her up to the perch, shaking his head, still bemused at his hens' behavior.

The last hen hops up onto a perch, nestles in between the others and tucks her head under her wing before dozing off. Then, just before the house goes dark, the hens fall silent—waiting for tomorrow.

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How Consumers Can Help

Following the Three Rs when you make your food choices can ease market pressure for extreme confinement systems. **Reduce or Replace**: Consume fewer animal products or replace them with plant-based items. **Refine**: If you do buy animal products, choose those from sources that adhere to higher animal welfare standards.

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: THE HSUS; HAPPY EGG CO.